

Sermon

2 August 2020

West Kirk of Calder/Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 14:13-21

Hymn: CH4 562 Through the love of God our Saviour

READING

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed those who were ill.

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.'

¹⁶ Jesus replied, 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.'

¹⁷ 'We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,' they answered.

¹⁸ 'Bring them here to me,' he said. ¹⁹ And he told the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

MESSAGE

My 3 boys and I went up north for a week and a half, for a wee holiday. To be quite honest, initially I wasn't sure whether we should risk going, but we just felt we needed a wee break, and I am so thankful we went. Looking back on it now, I can see that *that* was exactly what we needed...

As I was looking out of my window as we drove up north, I realised that we have actually never been in Scotland this time of year, because we usually go to South Africa during the summer school holidays! The beautiful scenery alongside the road just made me appreciate this beautiful country we live in so much more.

To drive over the mountains without worrying if the snow-gates will be open, to be surrounded by different shades of lush green and lots of purple all around us, was breath-taking.

On any long car journey, I usually fall asleep really quickly – but this time I stayed awake the whole time. I just couldn't get enough of the beautiful scenery.

We saw swans on the water and deer crossing the road. We stopped to pick strawberries almost as big as apples and we were mesmerised by the standing stones and beautiful ruins along the way.

And the highlight of our trip was when we reached the ocean. White sand and beautiful rocks. Seals bathing in the sun. And when we walked out on the pier one day we found dolphins and orcas playing in the water – so close to us it almost felt as if we could touch them!

All of this made me feel so thankful to be a part of God's creation. It made me think that just like he made the mountains and the valleys, the beaches and the ocean, he made me too. And my 3 boys. And every single one of you. We are all part of God's plan, and it's important that we do what we were made for...

But it's not always very easy to know exactly what that is...

And this brings me to our reading. Because in the wee passage we read from Matthew, we clearly saw that even the people closest to Jesus, his disciples, didn't always know what the right thing was to do...

Our passage starts with the words: "When Jesus heard what happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place." The news Jesus heard was about the beheading of John the Baptist by Herod. This must have been really upsetting, and it's understandable that he just wanted some quiet time to reflect and come to terms with what happened. So he got in a boat and went to a place where he thought he could do this.

But the minute the crowds heard where he was headed, they followed on foot, and met him at the shore. Poor Jesus just wanted some peace and quiet, but that was not meant to be.

I think most of us would be annoyed at the sight of the crowds, not respecting our wishes and needs – but not Jesus. The moment he saw them standing there, we read that he was *filled with compassion for them*, and he healed their sick. He wasn't upset, he didn't get in a huff and say: "Seriously?! Can't these people see I need a little me-time?" He didn't get back in the boat to get away from them and tend to his own

needs. No. He was filled with compassion for them. His response was to meet their needs, not his own.

The disciples were probably not surprised by Jesus' reaction, by this time they knew what he was like. But when evening came, he did something even *they* didn't expect! They wanted him to send the people to the villages to go buy themselves food. But Jesus told the disciples that *they* should give the people something to eat.

Their response was that they only had five loaves of bread and two fish – in other words – not even enough food to feed themselves, never mind a huge crowd of strangers. But Jesus was about to teach them a very important lesson.

He started acting like the perfect 1st century Mediterranean host: He directed the people to sit down on the grass, took the loaves and fish, looked up to heaven, gave thanks, and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to hand out to the people.

The disciples probably couldn't believe what they were seeing – the bread and fish miraculously just kept coming! Every single person there was fed. Everybody got what they needed. And there were even leftovers: 12 baskets full.

Just a wee side note here: The number 12 features prominently in the Bible, it appears 187 times. I'll give you a few examples: The Old Testament Book of Genesis states that there were 12 sons of Jacob and those 12 sons formed the 12 tribes of Israel. The New Testament tells us that Jesus had 12 disciples/apostles. According to the Book of

Revelation, the kingdom of God has 12 gates guarded by 12 angels. And as you all know, the number 12 is displayed in many other contexts, such as the 12 months of the year and the 12 constellations of the zodiac.

In those days the number 12 signified perfection of government or rule. 12 is the product of 3 and 4; where 3 signifies the divine, and 4 signifies the earthly. The divine multiplied by the earthly, equals perfection.

In other words – the symbolic reference here is that everybody's needs were met, and even the amount of leftovers were just perfect.

There are quite a few important things to note about this story:

- In the story just before this one, King Herod had a lavish banquet with a few selected distinguished guests, where he promised the girl who danced for them anything she wanted, and it turned out that *that* was the head of John the Baptist on a platter...
- The meal Jesus and the 5000 had stands in stark contrast to this. Here another King generously provided in the needs of all those who looked to him for guidance and leadership. He didn't only satisfy their hunger, but also the longing of their hearts.
- We need to take note that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world look completely different. And Jesus wants us to play a part in making the kingdom of the world more and more like the kingdom of God.
- The disciples weren't idle bystanders during this meal – they had a very important role to play. They needed to hand out the food and do the clearing up afterwards.

- Jesus wants to provide in the needs of all people. And as Christians we have a very important role to play in all this. *Jesus will provide, we need to share what he provides with all those around us.* Even if the timing doesn't suit us. Even if we had other plans in mind. Even if we feel exhausted ourselves. The only way in which the love of God can be shared with the world, is if **we** share it. We never have to worry whether there will be enough – God will do the multiplication. All we need to do is the sharing.

The message of this story is that the crowds followed Jesus, and his response was to meet their needs. We follow Jesus too. He will meet our needs as well.

Like so many of you these last few months, we, as a family, went through a lot recently. Some things didn't work out the way we were hoping they would. But without me realising it, what we needed just now, was a wee break, and God provided that.

While we were away, my boys were invited to go fishing one day.

André said it actually felt quite Biblical – being out there on the sea in a wee fishing boat, catching plenty of fish.

And then, that same night, we cooked and ate that fish. The boys were so proud of themselves. And I can honestly say that I have never eaten fish that tasted that good before. Literally fresh out of the water.

Just like God provided in *our* needs, he will provide in your needs too. We may not always get what we *want*, but we will most certainly get

what we *need*. To have faith means to truly trust in God, and accept that he knows exactly what we need when.

God provides in our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Always. We just need to open ourselves up to seeing it. And once we realise how special it is to receive his love, we won't be able to help ourselves: we will want to share it.

The God who fed more than 5000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish, is the same God who still takes care of us today. He can do absolutely anything! And that is something to be grateful for.

Amen

PRAYER

Written by the Rev Alison Quilter

Lord our God, maker of heaven and earth, your glory is all around us in all things bright and beautiful to behold. Your hand is in the wonders of nature, your purpose in the very matter of creation. We worship you Creator God with praise and thanks for the beauty and bounty of creation; for the love that makes and mends and for the power that transforms and unites. May we continue to be astounded by all you have done and all we know you to be. We praise you with all that we are and place your name on the front door of our lives.

Blessed are you, Lord our God, for you have called us into life and to love you. You have called us to proclaim your love and power in all the world. We ask your blessing upon your Church, that we may show signs of being one in you, dedicated to being disciples as we reach out to all

peoples to reveal your love in its care for all who come to it. Bless and guide all who preach the word, teach old and young and all who are involved in a pastoral ministry, and we pray for all who are seeking to revive and promote faith in you and your love. May the Church grow in love, in witness and in number.

Loving God, we give thanks for all who reveal your love and care through dedicated lives. We ask your blessing upon all those who work among deprived and under privileged peoples of the world. For Christian Aid and Tearfund and other aid organisations as they serve alongside the poor of the earth, meeting disaster and working for long-term development. For mission agencies as they share the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the world. For Church action on poverty and social care as they raise awareness of people in need in this country and around the world. We remember all who seek to bring peace and unity to communities and nations and we pray that leaders and governments seek your wisdom loving God, in all the decisions they make concerning the welfare of their peoples.

Thank you, God, for the simple acts of kindness when human love reaches out toward human need. We thank you for all the people we never notice but who, with quietness and grace, do the work of Christ. Help us to be partners in all this work, so that it can be done in our name and through our love as well as in the name and through the love of Jesus Christ.

Loving God, we give thanks for all who have shown us love and care. We ask your blessing upon our homes and loved ones. We give thanks for your healing love and we remember all who are separated from their

loved ones through illness or circumstance. We pray especially for the anxious, the lonely and any who feel unloved and those overwhelmed by daily living. May each be helped according to their needs.

Loving God, we give thanks for the gift of eternal life. We rejoice in the fellowship of all your saints and ask your blessing upon all our loved ones departed. May we share with them in the fullness and glory of your kingdom.

All these things we pray in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ who gives us the way to be, and the way to do, so that we become your people and your will. Amen.

HYMN

CH4 562

There is a Redeemer,
Jesus, God's own Son,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Holy One.

*Thank you, O my Father,
For giving us your Son,
And leaving us your Spirit
Till your work on earth is done.*

Jesus, my Redeemer,
Name above all names,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Once for sinners slain:

Chorus

When I stand in glory
I will see his face,
And there I'll serve my King for ever
In that holy place.

Chorus